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電撃文庫

Adachi to Shimamura - Volume 01 Chapter 01 (Incomplete)

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"Let's play ping pong."

Adachi, skipping class together with me, spoke the words that began what became a quiet table tennis fad for us. A ping pong table and a set of equipment, rarely used now, had been left here on the second floor of the gym. Since we couldn't risk opening the large windows, the space was a bit stuffy and hot.

A green net was stretched across the side overlooking the first floor. It had probably been left behind by the school's extinct table tennis club, to stop missed balls from dropping down below. Having gotten a bit bored of sitting on the edge of the net and chatting with Adachi in hushed voices, I agreed.

It was the end of October, a time when we'd already changed out of our summer uniforms but the weather was still too hot for our long-sleeve winter uniforms. The sky was clear and blue, and gym classes were being held outdoors. We were the only ones using the gym (although without permission). Glancing down at the first floor and confirming that we were alone, Adachi and I began to set up the table.

"Hey, in middle school, did you join any clubs?"

Adachi asked me while struggling to put up the net on the table. I'd been skipping class with Adachi for about a month, but I guess we hadn't talked about extracurricular clubs before.

"I did basketball. I was pretty into it! I even stayed late to practice shooting hoops."

"Hmm....That's unexpected," Adachi said. I wonder if she said that just because I was shorter than her.

"Then how about we play basketball?"

"I can't go all out on an amateur."

"Keep telling yourself that," Adachi laughed. If we played basketball on the court downstairs, the teachers would hear the noise and find us right away. Adachi wasn't serious about the idea either. And of course, since we were both wearing our uniforms, if we played basketball, we'd be too bothered by our skirts flipping up to focus on anything else.

For amateurs, the level of movement for table tennis is just right.

Quietly, in this small space on the second floor.

Adachi and I were first-year high school students. Since the start of classes, we'd both been a bit rebellious in our own little ways. We weren't old friends, but rather, had just become acquaintances at the start of high school. We knew a few things about each other, but they were far outnumbered by those that we didn't – and the majority of which I had no need of knowing.

Adachi's appearance wasn't very daring. Her hair was only just a bit too long for school regulations, and the brown tone of her dyed hair wasn't conspicuous. In fact, she could pass it off as her natural hair colour. She had a thin figure with few curves, and her sloping shoulders made one question whether she even had any. In addition to her sharp gaze, her thin lips made her give off a cold impression most of the time. In reality, there was a part of her that was calm, or what you might call, laid-back.

Although I'd seen her get angry or laugh before, I'd never heard her raise her voice.

Most of the time, she had a silver bracelet on her left wrist. Perhaps because of its size, it fell down around her wrist in such a way that she seemed to be wearing just one side of a pair of thin handcuffs.

As for me, my hair was a dark, chestnut colour that was very evidently dyed, no matter how anybody looked at it. My makeup also took more time than Adachi's did. It hardly seemed fair for me

to be treated like a troublemaker just because of my one small ear piercing, but Adachi was definitely more popular with the teachers. But that was probably because she was also prettier and had less attitude.

But don't be deceived. That girl was about three times more rebellious than me. You can tell just by class attendance. Unfortunately, even though I was three times more diligent than Adachi was, it didn't make me an A + student. The fact that our test scores turned out about the same was also very puzzling.

Adachi took off the coat of her uniform and tied it around her waist. After setting up the ping pong table, I followed suit. It'd be a pain if I made any big motions and tore the seams, and more importantly, it was hot.

Since I'd be sweating anyway, I removed my makeup before picking up the moldy rubber racket. I laid the polka-dot pink ping pong ball on the palm of my hand. Watching Adachi, standing opposite me with a racket in her left hand, it struck me that she was left-handed.

"When was the last time you played ping pong?"

"Hmm...I haven't played since maybe the kids' meeting in Grade 6?"

We conversed while serving and returning the ball. I smiled at those nostalgic words.

"Kids' meeting! Wow - I haven't heard that phrase in so long! It's been ages."

Being right-handed, it was easy for me to aim for Adachi's open right side. I mercilessly attacked that area, just to have Adachi deftly hit the ball with the backside of her racket, barely shifting from her spot.

"Well, don't you have good reflexes."

"Look what else I can do——"

Switching the racket over to her right hand in the blink of an eye, she returned my weak ball with a powerful volley. —Whoa, that

was amazing. Even though the ball missed the table completely and ended up flying into the net behind me.

Just like that, we whiled away the time, casually playing ping pong and occasionally getting serious. In the classroom, it would be the third period. Was the third period on Mondays math or history? Preoccupied with chasing after the ball, I didn't have the time to recall the answer to my question. It seemed like my mind was also determined to take time off from school.

Adachi and I hadn't always skipped class together. In the beginning, Adachi had had her own hideouts, and me, my own. Not that Adachi had really come to school much anyway.

Manga and such always portray students skipping class out on the school rooftop, but honestly, there aren't any schools that would leave their rooftops unlocked for students to wander out. Besides, it'd be terrible getting sunburnt from falling asleep out in the sun. That's why I chose the second floor of the gym, where I'd be safe from the sun and prying eyes, and one day, it just so happened that Adachi was also there.

The second school term had just started, and it had been stiflingly hot. Maybe because of that, she'd been lazing around with her shoes - and even her socks - off. I still remember how she'd jumped to her feet, startled, thinking that I was a teacher making my rounds. The way she'd moved her petite toes back and forth was also memorable.

Since then, we'd started hanging out together more often for no particular reason, just like we were now. Getting a feeling that the other person might have shown up that day, we'd come here to check, just to find our hunch to be right. Adachi seldom stayed around until the end of the school day, so I often left with two of my other friends. The two of them were diligent students and had probably never missed copying a single word off of the blackboard, much less skipping class.

The two diligent students, and the two troublemakers – it was almost as if we were making a half-hearted attempt to balance each other out. The ping pong ball floated slowly back and forth between

us, as these thoughts cycled absently through my mind.

And thus, this moment away from the many things that trifle with me was complete.

“I can’t take it anymore...it’s too hot....”

Adachi declared, while undoing the top button of her shirt. Leaving the racket on the table, she waved her hands in protest. I stepped away from the table too, pulling at the sleeves of my shirt, which was plastered against my skin with sweat. I ended up taking the ping pong ball with me, still gripped in my hand. It probably wouldn’t stay on top of the table if I threw it, so I gave up on trying.

Cleaning hadn’t been done properly, and the dust that had accumulated stuck to the floor like wax. Feeling somewhat repulsed by the thought of sitting on that, the two of us quietly sat down on the net that had been put up to stop balls from falling onto the first floor.

“I wish there was some wind.”

Adachi whispered, with a flushed face. I felt the same way, and glared up at the windows that we couldn’t open.

If we opened them, we’d run the risk of having this place and us found out.

“Do you wanna go outside? It’s almost lunchtime anyway.”

Adachi had rolled up her shirt sleeves and pulled the hem of her shirt out from where it had been tucked into her skirt. I could never bring myself to wear my uniform in such a casual manner. If left alone, she’d probably lift up her skirt too – another thing that I couldn’t pull off. Even if nobody’s watching, it’s still somehow embarrassing. As I was thinking that, it actually began to happen – Adachi was fanning herself with her skirt.

“My, how shameless! Our school’s, um, what was that word? Um....”

“Respectability?”

"Yeah, that. It will go down."

"So, lunch. What should we do?"

Adachi said, while sneaking glances at me. I let the non sequitur slide.

As I'd be properly dressed in my uniform if I just put my blazer back on, it naturally followed that it would be easier for me to go buy lunch. Adachi, on the other hand, would have to tuck her shirt back into her skirt, roll down her sleeves, and button up her shirt before putting her blazer back on. And I guess she'd probably want to fix her hair too, seeing as it was in slight disarray, floating lightly above her head.

"Fine, fine. I'll go."

"I'll go next time."

"Except *your* 'next time' is totally different from mine."

I'm pretty sure she'd already called at least the next five times already, but Adachi just laughed it off.

"A danish, and hm...I'll go with water, please."

"Got it. If they're sold out, I'll just grab something else."

Adachi always drank mineral water. It made me a bit jealous to think that that might be why her skin tone and facial features were so clear and well-defined. Maybe Adachi has water instead of blood running through her veins.

"Are you going to class in the afternoon?"

"Probably. You? Going home?"

"Hmm....well, either way, I'm not going to go to class."

Immediately unfolding her arms from their pensive pose, Adachi placed her hands on the floor. The expression of her side profile had already returned to an air of nonchalance.

I had never seriously asked Adachi why she didn't go to class, and the opposite was also true. We just gathered here for no real reason, and feeling bored nonetheless, tried entertaining ourselves by playing ping pong.

I flicked away the ping pong ball that I had kept in my hand. Bouncing lightly across the floor, it hit the wall and came to a stop. Its sound resembled that of a gentle knock on the door of someone's heart.

Adachi spoke, as she took off her indoor shoes and dangled them from her fingertips. Being completely focused on that pastime, her expression was unnecessarily grim. She looked desperate, with her lower lip protruding and curled back.

"Ping pong's pretty fun."

"Yeah. I guess individual sports do suit me better after all."

Basketball's fun too, but in my last year of junior high, I'd come to realize that I wasn't suited for it. In competitions, I prefer to see how far I can get by myself, and I knew quite well just how much that could end up ruining the dynamics in team sports. Besides, I'd been told off a lot for hogging the ball.

"But it's different, you know? If we had to play ping pong in gym class, I think I probably wouldn't join in."

"Mm, true. I run off somewhere else when that happens."

Adachi agreed, as she stretched her arms up. After her right arm trembled slightly, the elbow cracked, and Adachi let out a small sigh. Apparently, her elbow cracks like that after she stretches her arm out straight. What's up with that?

"Shimamura, you and I agree on the weirdest things."

Adachi probably thought nothing of saying my name, but I felt slightly displeased. I don't really like that my last name is Shimamura. Whenever people say Shimamura, they inevitably think of SHIMAMURA, the fashion store^[1]. I keep feeling like people have the store in mind whenever they say my name. Even

something like Shimazaki would have been better.

As we sat there daydreaming with our legs stretched out, the bell marking the end of classes rang throughout the gym.

As the broadcasted noise vibrated through the gym (that was supposed to be empty), a replying growl came from my stomach.

"There goes the bell."

"Yup."

"Off you go."

Adachi waved goodbye at me, so I grudgingly got to my feet and put my jacket and indoor shoes back on. I headed for the stairs, after checking that I had my wallet with me. On my way there, I turned around and caught a glimpse of Adachi as she stretched out her arm to get her phone from her bag, failed, and flopped back down in her original position. I can totally sympathize with the situation, but I taunted her anyway, "Slacker-". I heard the sound of her heels beating against the floor in protest, but I continued on down the stairs, my shoulders shaking in laughter.

The list of contacts saved on Adachi's phone is just one of the many things that I don't know. I've never seen her talking with anybody at school other than me. Well, I guess it's to be expected. She barely comes to school, after all.

But since I've been seeing her here a lot lately, maybe she's been coming to see me.

The thought of it made me feel a bit uneasy.

And for some reason it felt like Adachi would never come to the second floor of the gym again if I were to mention it.

"Ping pong?" Adachi invited me to play again the next day. She

seemed to somehow look a bit more enthusiastic than yesterday. I began setting up the table and net while pondering over this change. With experience on our side, we finished setting up a bit faster than yesterday.

“Can I serve first?”

“I guess...”

Gripping a different orange ping pong ball than yesterday's, Adachi served, with a small shout. The way she hit the ball looked a bit professional. Her racket sliced the bottom of the ball sharply, and sent the ball off with a weird spin. The ball landed right in front of me, before bouncing back towards Adachi's side of the table.

“Hmm?”

As I looked on with suspicion, Adachi smiled back widely with a childish expression. It was a rare and memorable moment.

“I looked it up on the Internet yesterday. I was practicing with a shamoji [\[2\]](#)though, since I don't have a racket or anything.”

She twirled her racket back and forth quickly as she bragged, proud that the unveiling of her serve technique had gone successfully. It was more of a surprise to me that Adachi was suddenly so into ping pong, but I focused on expressing my chagrin, and let it slide.

“That's low! I can't believe you'd use a curve ball on an amateur.”

“It's your fault for having no ambition. Look out –”

Adachi got into her weird pose again to begin another serve. But this time, it seemed that she sliced the bottom edge of the ball too sharply, and the ping pong ball flew back towards her. It bounced off the wall. Adachi picked it up, scratching her head. She explained, while bouncing the ping pong ball on her racket.

"You see, I haven't quite perfected it enough to get the ball to go forward more than 10% of the time...."

"So you learned a new move, and ended up worse off for it?"

I can practically win just by standing still. Ah, the next serve failed and flew off into the distance too. The ping pong ball jumped wildly and bounced off the other ping pong table and the floor. Since the ball ended up on my side of the net, I moved to go fetch it (even though it was Adachi's fault). At that moment, I heard voices from the gym below us.

It was as if my heart had been pricked by needles. My body suddenly stopped moving, and the ping pong ball escaped. Adachi had a similar response. I could hear girls' voices. Adachi circled around the ping pong table beside me, so we peeked downstairs together. If anybody climbed onto the stage and looked up, we would see each other. The needles stabbed into my heart had already melted away, but my skin felt taut with tension.

Hmm, it seemed as though this period was gym class. Girls from our year were setting up for volleyball. I knew that they were from our year right away because I caught sight of some of my friends. Hino and Nagafuji were moving a net and the supporting poles. We'd only ever sat and talked quietly before, so it had never frightened us so much when people came into the gym. Because of that, I had barely picked up on the class schedules at all.

Hands pressed against our mouths, the two of us carefully crouched and sat down. We waited, hearts in our mouths, watching to see if anybody would react to the sound of the ping pong ball bouncing lightly.

"Oh my god, I'm so nervous," Adachi whispered to me, in a voice filled with excitement.

"Why are you getting a kick out of this?" I laughed, as I elbowed her gently.

"What should we do if they come on up here?" I asked.

Adachi laughed, with her smile still hidden behind her hands, and looked upward.



"How about we open the windows, jump out, and make a run for it?"

"How about we open the windows, jump out, and make a run for it?"

"What? No way, this is the second floor. Won't we break our legs?"

I voiced my doubts about Adachi's proposal. We'd never even peeked out to see what was under the window, which made it even

scarier. But I guess I'm taking her joke too seriously.

In response, Adachi nodded to herself. "Hm, I'll keep in mind that you've got a calcium deficiency."

"I'm not taking that interpretation very well!"

I wonder if getting angry like that is already another indication that I don't have enough calcium[3].

I could sense my classmates chatting behind the wall that I was leaning back on. It seemed like the teacher hadn't shown up yet, and nothing was stopping them from talking. Hino and Nagafuji don't know where I go when I skip class, so they probably wouldn't even imagine that we were in the same area. Put in that perspective, this situation felt a bit fun.

Crouching together in hiding, it felt like the two of us were doing something wrong. Well, of course we weren't actually, but it felt appropriately fun to be sharing that experience with Adachi. Does it feel so addicting because it's with Adachi, or is it simply because I'm drunk on the feeling of doing something I shouldn't be?

I knew right away, but I deliberately left the question unanswered.

At some point, the orange ping pong ball had rolled against the wall and come to a stop.

"For today's lunch, maybe I'll try drinking some milk for a change of pace. Just so my legs won't break even if I jump down."

Adachi planned, with an expression that looked half serious.

Of course, today also didn't turn out to be the 'next time' that Adachi had promised.

That day, as usual, Adachi had once again already disappeared by the time school ended. She'd mentioned before that her mom would get on her case if she went home early, so I think she probably wandered around town, whiling the time away.

As with the day before, I attended class after lunch, and after that, I

stopped by a bookstore with Hino and Nagafuji. Normally I wouldn't go there with them as it was in the opposite direction from my house, but there was something that I kind of wanted to see today. I wasn't sure if there was a book like that though, as I'd never looked in that section before.

"Wow, they do have them...."

Scanning the shelves in the sports section, I pulled out a book that taught table tennis. If Adachi's going to rely on the Internet, then I'll go with books. Turning the book over to look at the price tag, I couldn't help but let out an exclamation.

"Whoa, that's expensive!"

I could see now why the Internet got so popular. It's more convenient to look things up, and it's way cheaper.

"Whatcha lookin' at?"

Hino stepped up beside me, and tried to peer over at the book I was holding. We'd parted at the entrance to the bookstore, but it seemed that she'd spotted me and came over. It'd be a pain to hide it, so I showed her the cover.

"Shimamura, you're going to join the table tennis club?" She tilted her head in surprise. We don't have a table tennis club at our school.

Hino was a classmate of mine, and was the epitome of plain. Apparently, she'd never dyed her hair before, or shoplifted, or pulled on the hair of girls from other schools. I haven't tried doing the latter two before either.

Her eyes were round and big, and overall, she summoned a feeling of affection in others...or rather, the impression that she was earnest, as evidenced by her addition of vocal sound effects as she swung her air racket. She gets swept up in the mood, so I'm sure if a few compliments went her way, she could be persuaded to do at least a few backflips on the spot. Also, she often sighs about the lack of fellow fishers at our school who share in her hobby of

fishing, but that's another tale.

"Well? Why table tennis? Were they doing a rerun of 'Ping Pong' on Friday night? [4]"

"I wasn't really influenced by anything....I just felt like it?"

It was difficult to explain -- well, not really, but the words just didn't come out. I returned the book back to the shelf without reading a single page. Maybe I should just rely on the Internet too. I'll just start getting upset now, since I have a feeling that Adachi will accuse me of copying her. Having gotten this emotionally invested, it'll actually be more of a problem now if she doesn't.

"Heyyy, don't leave me behind--"

The last of our trio found us too, and proclaimed her presence in a slightly monotonous voice as she plodded over.

Nagafuji has big breasts and glasses. They're such defining features that nothing more really needs to be said, but to add some more detail, her hair often dangles down around both sides of her neck and on her breasts when she's not in her school uniform and doesn't have her hair up. Her straight hair is very smooth and has a good texture.

In direct proportion to the size of her breasts, her attitude is also very laid back and mature. Except she's a bit of an airhead.

"So what were you talking about?"

"Don't worry about it." Hino slapped Nagafuji's breasts.

"Got it, I won't worry about it." Nagafuji hit Hino's head in return. I heard that Hino and Nagafuji have been friends since junior high. On the other hand, I only met them in high school, so even though we all call each other friends, the distance between us is different. But it's not like being close is always best. Being too close can sometimes end up in misunderstandings.

"What's your excuse for such natural sexual harassment?"

"Nagafuji was too tense, so I thought I'd help take her mind off of things."

Hino wasn't ashamed of her actions at all. Actually, I've never seen her being ashamed. She must have a strong sense of what's right. Or is that the wrong term to use?

"Oh, is that why?" I asked Nagafuji, who gave a small nod and turned her gaze downwards, as if embarrassed.

"Well...it attracts guys' attention when they're big, so it does bother me in a way." Nagafuji crossed her arms in front of her chest, as if to hide her breasts. Of course, they weren't hidden at all.

"The guys in our class have probably imagined touching your boobs more than ten times."

"Ugh...that's pretty disturbing."

Nagafuji seemed perturbed by what I'd said. The boys were probably imagining even more daring things, but I didn't want to get into those details in such a place, so I'd omitted them. Glancing at the ping pong book that I'd returned to the shelf, I let out a breath.

"I'm telling you, it's just a small price to pay."

As she said that, Hino patted Nagafuji's breasts, casually as she would somebody's shoulder.

"Oops, got them mixed u--" Nagafuji slapped Hino across the head before she could finish her sentence, so she ended up biting her tongue.

Both sounded frivolous. I slipped away quietly, to avoid being considered one of them.

Although I fled the scene, the three of us were together again when we left the bookstore. It's not like I'd actually try to run from them.

"Shimamura, you skip class a lot, but what is there actually to do?"

Walking along beside me, Hino asked as she hugged the bag with her newly bought magazine to her. Nagafuji looked at me too, waiting for my answer. It seems like they're still somewhat interested, despite being good students. Regardless, it's not like there's anything in particular for me to explain. My hangout isn't so appealing that it's worth leading the two of them astray from their fight against the monotony of the classroom.

Not that that doesn't prompt to think about why I'm even there in the first place.

"What I do? Nothing much...lazing around, daydreaming, doing stuff on my cellphone...."

I didn't tell them that I also played ping pong.

"What freedom," Hino said. She didn't seem jealous.

"We have a place like that at school? It seems like the teachers would be able to find you wherever you went."

Nagafuji looked puzzled. For a proper student that had no business with the deserted parts of the school, it was probably hard to imagine good hiding spots. I'd rather Nagafuji remain that way.

"Oh, I have a good guess of where you go."

"Huh?"

Hino suddenly figured it out. I don't know if she's actually right, but it made me falter.

"Shall we go looking next time?" She suggested excitedly to Nagafuji.

"Please don't...." I stopped them with a wry smile. It'd be troublesome if they actually found me.

It would have been fine if it was just me, but now I have to consider Adachi's circumstances too.

"Speaking of which, I ran into somebody really weird when I went fishing this past Sunday!"

I rolled my eyes at Hino's sudden and inexplicably proud outburst. How many times have we heard this kind of story before?

"Aren't you just running into weird people all the time?"

Surprisingly, the people that Hino introduced with that phrase actually were pretty weird. Maybe it's because of the stars' alignment on the day she was born. Except that would make me a weirdo too.

"It's better than running into perverts," Nagafuji offered. Well, yeah. But are you okay with living like that, Hino?

"The one I met recently was somebody that was wearing some sort of spacesuit..." Hino continued on in a cheerful tone, so I guess she's okay with it. Well, whatever makes her happy.

As Hino went on with her tale about the weird kid, we finally got back to our school area and began our trek home. Hino and Nagafuji get to school by bus so we walk together up until we get to the bus stop. From there, I walk home by myself. There's only one bike in my family, and it's used by my mother so I rarely ever get to ride it. My mother was originally the athletic type and still goes to the gym regularly, so she's unnaturally fast on her bike. In fact, sightings of her on her bike led to some scary stories being passed around in my neighbourhood.

"Hey, look over there!"

As we passed by a gasoline stand, Hino suddenly pointed ahead of us. After she'd checked that we were looking that way, she dropped her hand down quickly. As I focused on where she'd been pointing at, wondering what it was--

"Oh--"

It was Adachi.

Adachi was sitting with poor manners upon the rail separating the

road and the sidewalk. She was dressed roughly as usual, with her blazer off and her shirt not tucked in. She seemed to be worrying over her bangs, as she was playing with them while looking into a pocket mirror.

If she toppled backwards, she would undoubtedly fall out onto the road. That was more worrisome than her bad manners of sitting on the rail.

To the side was a bicycle with a blue frame that seemed to belong to Adachi.

I found out at that moment that Adachi rode her bike to school.

Adachi noticed us too. Hino cowered from her glance. She and Nagafuji probably haven't spoken with Adachi before, and also wouldn't know that we were friends. It wouldn't be a surprise if they interpreted Adachi's glance as a challenge. Well then, taking all of that into account...

I'd never really thought about seeing Adachi outside of the gym. I wonder what I should do in situations like these. Although Adachi was looking over, she wasn't making a move to approach us either. She was probably at a loss too.

It'd be awkward to keep staring at each other, so I averted my gaze.

In the end, we both pretended we didn't know each other.

We passed by Adachi, as I tried not to be too conscious of her. Adachi didn't call out to me either. I wonder if she's angry that I ignored her. Turning around, our eyes met and almost at the same time, we looked away again.

"....."

What's with this awkward, unsettling feeling? It's not like we're a couple that are keeping our relationship secret. Well, I suppose the nuance is the same.

"Who was that? Haven't we see her in class before, around April?" Nagafuji asked me as she tucked her long hair behind her ear.

Again?

"Dude, you ask who she is every time you see her," Hino pointed out.

"Really?" Nagafuji replied with mild disbelief. Hmm, maybe she really isn't using her brain that much after all.

"She's...Adachi. From the same grade."

"She's a real troublemaker, officially recognized by the teachers."

Hino added on to my simple explanation. Troublemakers that the teachers don't recognize as such aren't troublemakers, are they?

"I see...Shimamura's comrade?"

"Who knows?"

From Nagafuji's point of view, I'm a troublemaker too. The only difference is that I sometimes show up to class, and Adachi never shows up. It means nobody thinks a troublemaker can take things seriously.

But there is a slight difference. Adachi's tough like a gangster, whereas I can't help but give people the impression that I'm spacing out, like an iguana spending all day lazing about under the sun.

I wonder what Adachi the gangster had been doing out here.

As I turned around casually one last time, Adachi was already speeding away on her bike.

The next day was Wednesday, with a large part of the week still ahead of us. Despite waiting, Adachi just wouldn't show up.

Even after the first period ended and some class was leaving the gym, I was still all by myself on the second floor. It was a cloudy day, so not much sunlight came in through the window. The milder

temperature made it easier for my mind to wander.

But by the time this continued into the third period, even I started to get bored. After I checked the time to make sure that the third period had started with nobody coming, I wrapped my fingers around the handle of a table tennis racket. Picking up an orange ping pong ball that had been left lying around, I hit it towards the wall. The ball hit the wall, bouncing once along its way, and rebounded back towards me. I hit it again. What was this called again? Wall practice?

This kind of secret practice is what will widen the gap between me and Adachi. Even though yesterday's gap was just because Adachi had handicapped herself by insisting on using her weird serve. As the ball bounced back and forth between me and the wall with a hollow sound, I glanced towards the stairs once in a while.

Was Adachi not going to come? Since I'd run into her here, she'd been coming almost everyday, so it made me uneasy to think that she wouldn't show up all the time. Maybe because of yesterday's incident after school, I felt even more unnecessarily worried--. That's right, I'm sure it's an unnecessary worry.

If yesterday's encounter were to lead to Adachi never showing up here again, I would regret it for -- well, maybe not my whole life but about half a year. After half a year, we'd change classes and the memory of it would fade away like ink.

To this day, I've already encountered and parted with many people and many memories, and these are all what have brought me to where I am, to this moment where I'm surrounded by Adachi, and Hino and Nagafuji. Coming up to the surface for a quick breath, then sinking deep, deep down. After losing many things, until it becomes hard to breath -- that's when it's time to make for the surface again. Such is my impression of what it's like to deal with other people.

"...!"

There was the sound of somebody climbing up the stairs. I stopped my practice and stood still on the spot, waiting to see who it was. It

could be Adachi, or it could be a teacher. Technically, it should have been a nerve-wracking moment but from the unique sound of the students' indoor shoes, it was clear from the start that it wasn't a teacher.

The person that appeared was, as expected, Adachi. She looked relieved when she saw me.

Today she didn't even have her schoolbag with her, which she normally carried over one shoulder.

"Hey. Late start today?"

"Mm. I was thinking of heading out already, but stopped by to check things out."

Adachi said as she brushed her hand through her hair. 'Already'? It's not even noon yet.

More importantly, if she was leaving now, did that mean she'd been at school for a while already?

"Besides, I heard the sounds of a ping pong ball."

Sitting down in her usual spot, Adachi glanced at my hands.

Had I really been making enough noise for her to hear from that far away?

Putting down the racket and ping pong ball, I sat down as well. Then I turned towards Adachi and spoke.

"So I saw you yesterday."

"Mm, same here."

Nodding at each other as if to confirm this fact, an awkward silence fell in between us. I felt strangely self-conscious, like when I went out to eat with my family in elementary school and ran into a classmate.

These discontinuations in conversation and in the mood were rather

frequent with Adachi. Maybe because I couldn't decide how close of a friend I wanted to be with her. Under the umbrella term 'friend', there's a wide range in terms of position and relationship.

"Where's your bag?"

"With my bike. It was a pain to carry, so I left it in the basket."

From what I could see, she didn't have her cell phone or her wallet with her either. I guess she'd been planning on leaving right away.

Still, she should be more careful with her stuff. But if I told her that, she'd probably laugh at me for acting like her mom.

"I didn't know you biked to school."

"I never told you? I play around with my bike keys once in a while."

She started twirling the keys that she'd been holding in her hand, spinning them around with the keychain as the axis. The keychain was some sort of purple...dog? Cow? I could tell there were four legs, but I couldn't figure out the species.

"Oh, now that you mention it. I wasn't really paying attention."

Both of us fell silent. Although there should have been things that we could talk about, I couldn't think of anything to say. I think the same was true for Adachi. I looked up at the window in front of me, and squinted.

"Well then, I'll get going now." Adachi got to her feet.

"Hm? Mm." I looked up at her, and nodded hesitantly. Gently brushing off the back of her skirt, Adachi walked towards the stairs while spinning her bike keys. It really made me wonder why she'd even come. I mean, of course, she must have just come to check things out.

"Hey, Adachi," Still seated, I called out to her as she walked away. Adachi turned around with a puzzled look.

"Which would you prefer? Attending class together today, or going

home together?"

I'm not sure what made me ask that. But there was an emptiness in me, and that emptiness functioned as my heart should have. It pleaded with me.

This is not enough. The feeling, almost like hunger, urged me forward.

Lunch break was close and I was starving. Who knows? Maybe I was actually feeling hunger.

Adachi was a bit taken aback, but after her surprise passed, she didn't hesitate for long.

"...Then maybe I'll find somewhere to hang out for a while until school ends."

Adachi chose the latter. I laughed inwardly. True, there's no way she'd choose to go to class.

If the result's known from the start, there's not much point in setting out two choices.

"I'll wait for you at yesterday's spot."

"Got it."

Adachi waved at me and, caught in the moment, I gave her a small wave in return.

Going home together from school after loitering around outside is kind of odd.

It's definitely odd. The idea was somehow so preposterous that I laughed as I watched Adachi leave.

I always wish for school to end sooner, but today, the feeling was just a tiny bit stronger.

Nagafuji had extracurriculars so it was often the case that Hino and I would get left behind to go home with just the two of us. But today I had something going on too, so I left Hino behind with a casual farewell.

"I'm going to die of loneliness," Hino protested, but we nevertheless parted ways at the front entrance of the school.

The good thing about Hino and Nagafuji is that although they may reproach me, they never get involved. They don't try to intervene and save me from myself. Let those who will be evil, be evil.

Stepping outside of the school building in my outdoor shoes, the rain fell lightly about me. Realizing my plight, I naturally began walking faster. I hadn't brought an umbrella or anything with me, so by the time I passed through the school gates, I was running.

Was Adachi already waiting for me? The thought of it made me feel bad, so much that I probably would have been running even if it wasn't raining. Not that I was expecting anything; it's just proper manners.

I had just passed by a few uniformed high school boys and the gasoline stand when I caught sight of Adachi. I felt a mix of emotions - I was relieved to see her there, and yet felt bad that she'd had to wait.

Amidst the light drizzle, Adachi was waiting with an umbrella. That she'd brought an umbrella with her was yet another surprise.

"Um, you didn't really have to wait in the same pose as yesterday..."

I laughed, seeing Adachi sitting on the guardrail in the same pose as the day before. Adachi noticed me running up to her and got up off the guardrail. She waited for me with her hands on the handlebar of her bike.

Running all the way up to her, I felt as if I'd reached the finish line of my journey, even though I hadn't gotten home yet.

"Sorry about the rain."

"Not at all. It's not your fault it's raining." Adachi said, seemingly ill at ease. She passed her umbrella to me to hold. With both hands free, she kicked the stand of her bike free and turned back to me.

"Shimamura, which way is your house?"

"This way," I replied, pointing straight ahead.

"That's what I thought..."

Adachi's expression clouded over. Looking at her questioningly, she continued.

"It's just that it's a pretty different direction from my house..." She said, pointing in a direction about 70 degrees away from my house. Since we hadn't been in the same ward for middle school, it should have been self-apparent that our houses would be pretty far apart. Adachi wouldn't need to pass by here to get home.

Then why had she been here yesterday? The list of unknown facts between us just grows longer.

"Whose house should we go home to first?"

"What an innovative question. Hmm, then how about we start with your house?" I replied. No matter whose house we went to first, the other person would end up having to take a detour back home. Since I'd made her wait in the rain, among other things, I suggested having Adachi go first. She got on her bike without protest.

"Want to get on the back? And hold the umbrella?"

Adachi lightly kicked the back wheel with her foot. It wasn't a bad idea but I admonished her jokingly.

"It's against the rules to double up!"

"It doesn't matter; we're troublemakers anyway."

"True...what an advantage troublemakers have."

"Couldn't say it better."

Letting myself be easily convinced, I got on the back of the bike. Placing my feet on either side of the tire, I put a hand on Adachi's shoulder. With my remaining hand, I held the umbrella. At my sign, Adachi began pedalling. At first, the bike moved slowly but as the pace evened out, Adachi started pedalling smoothly.

I looked down at her head. Although it looked pretty when viewed along with her face, the sight of just the top of Adachi's head was somewhat surreal. I wonder if my head's like that too.

If either of us had been good, disciplined students, we probably would have put on a display of true friendship and admonished the other to prevent them straying from the path. "It won't do to act like this!" But in our case, both of us are problem children.

It's more like we're dragging each other deeper into the depths of sin.

But God, this umbrella. It's too high up from either of us to keep the rain off.

"So you have friends."

Doubling back on the path from which I came, Adachi spoke to me, still facing forward.

Her voice was calm, but sounded a bit dry. I wonder if it's because it's coming from somewhere below me.

I had a feeling that the mood could become awkward depending on my answer. Not that I know why that should be.

"I'm also friends with UNIQLO and H&M."

I poked fun at the last name that I disliked. Adachi's shoulders shook gently, as if she was laughing.

"I thought you were hanging out at that kind of place because you didn't have friends."

Out of character, Adachi spoke about me. Or maybe that interpretation was aimed indirectly at herself. In turn, I asked

Adachi about her.

"What about you? Got any friends?"

"Mm....maybe just Shimamura."

"What a small circle!"

Despite saying that, I was secretly pleased. It's probably not a pleasant fact for Adachi though.

The bike turned sharply at the next corner. Adachi had steered as she normally did, but the bike faltered because of my additional weight. Weaving, we glazed the wall of the building beside us.

After regaining control, Adachi turned her head upwards. With complete disregard for the fact that she was still pedalling and steering the bike, she looked up at me.

"W-what's wrong?"

Adachi didn't answer right away. With her back still arched, she charged forward. I wanted to watch the road in her stead, but it was hard to look away while being stared at.

"Earlier, when I was watching you run this way, I was thinking..."

"O-okay..."

"You resemble a cat."

I heard the sound of the bikes' tires spinning under Adachi.

"A cat?"

"You're not human."

What a terrible thing to say. How horribly was I running? Or is it my face? Is it my face that's cat-like?

"What about me resembles a cat?"

"How you don't really warm up to people."

"...Is that so?"

"Isn't it?"

How I don't try to talk about myself or the person I'm talking to.

I felt like that's what Adachi's eyes were telling me. My grip on Adachi's shoulders tightened.

I think there's a part of me that doesn't let people in. But that's probably true of everybody, albeit to varying degrees. It's a given fact of life. It might be these kinds of views of the world that make people think I don't warm up to them.

But isn't Adachi like that too?

Well, I've never had a cat before so I can't even tell if what Adachi's saying is right.

"I don't think somebody that doesn't warm up to people would ride double on a bike."

"Maybe I look like a cat to them too."

With that, Adachi finally turned back to face the front. Although she returned to driving safely, I didn't feel relieved; rather, a feeling of anxiety grew closer. I just don't feel comfortable talking this much about myself.

My thoughts fled from the topic, the same way that I would avert my eyes from a problem. They fled to thoughts of Adachi.

Adachi as a cat too? Two cats, in hiding on the second floor of the gym.

Lazing about in front of the windows, in the humid space.

Chasing after the ping-pong ball as it bounced back and forth busily.

It does indeed sound just like the description of a cat.

"Can you draw me a map? I don't know how to get back to school."

"Ah, I was wondering if this would happen."

Adachi promptly acknowledged my request. From her schoolbag, she pulled out a notebook and some writing utensils that seemed like they would be dusty. I was impressed that she even had these things with her.

Adachi's house, situated about 30 minutes away from where we'd started, was very white. Well, the walls were, at least. There was a sheltered parking spot to the left of the building, but there weren't any cars parked there right now. It was almost completely hidden behind the wall, but I could just barely see, in the depths of the space, the end of a green pole used to hang clothes up to dry.

Right in front of the main entrance was a field. There were three or four plots of farmland, lined up in a row. Straight past the field, there was a large building that looked like a factory, just as one would expect in the remote suburbs. The area around my house is pretty much the same.

In the past, there had been even more fields. It had always smelled of grass, to the point that it was more rare than not to see another house. Now, most of the area is covered in houses, and fields have become the rarity.

When I was in elementary school, I'd drawn pictures of myself walking alongside the fields, but that scenery doesn't exist anymore.

"Here, I'm done. It's the road that I take on my bike, so you can probably pass through it too."

"What's that mean? That I'm wider than a bicycle?"

"You probably are, if you stretch out both your arms."

Adachi laughed as she handed over the map that she'd scribbled on a scrap from her notebook. Who's gonna walk like that? Staring at

the map that she gave me, I traced the path back to the school. Doing so, I realized - with this map, I could find my way to Adachi's house on my own.

Not that the opportunity will come up often. There's no point coming if I don't know if Adachi is home.

"Did you get wet from the rain?"

Adachi patted at my hair and shoulders.

"Aren't you pretty drenched?"

"Yeah, the rain started coming down pretty strong on our way here."

As for Adachi, her bangs had gotten wet and were plastered to her forehead. Perhaps noticing my gaze, she brushed her bangs up. With her forehead exposed, Adachi gave off a different feel than normal. She seemed a bit more grown-up.

"Want to come in? I can lend you a towel."

"Hm...it's fine. It'd be a bother for you anyway if I walked in all wet. Right?"

It was like I was pushing Adachi to agree with a reason for me to refuse. Adachi gave me a wry smile.

"It's so typical of you to distance yourself like that."

Translator's notes [[edit](#)]

1. ↑ [SHIMAMURA](#) is known for selling fast fashion. Unlike [UNIQLO](#), which has the same shirt in different colours and sizes, pretty much every item in Shimamura is different from the others. The company name is stylized in all hiragana (しまむら), whereas last names are often shown in kanji (島村). For aesthetic purposes, the character's name will be written with proper capitalization instead of in all caps like the

company name. However, in the original text, Shimamura's name is actually stylized like the company's - even when other characters are narrating....I guess this means she was right about everybody secretly calling her by the company name.

2. ↑ [Shamoji](#): A wooden paddle used to scoop rice.
3. ↑ There's a common belief in Japan that low calcium levels will make people feel irritable and angry. In this case, Adachi is teasing Shimamura about having low calcium levels because she's scared her bones will break, and Shimamura is playing along by pretending to get angry.
4. ↑ [金曜ロードショー](#) ("Kinyou Roadshow" or "Friday Roadshow") is a programme that shows old movies and films every Friday night on [日テレ](#) ("Nippon Television"). [Ping Pong](#) is just one of the movies that might be aired in that time slot.